



Jiro Oyama



The Oyama family from left to right: Renko, Chiyo, Jiro (baby), Iwao (at the bottom), Zengoro and Minnie

“And as I was standing there, I was looking around to see, realizing that everyone was concerned about the attack and that they would be looking at me. I didn’t consider other Japanese, too. It was me that was to blame.”

Jiro Oyama's eventful life represents the essence of the achievement of the American dream. As the youngest son born to a hardworking family in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, his early years were punctuated by tragic and difficult life events. When he was nine, his father died from a prolonged illness after a job on a fishing boat, leaving his mother with four children to raise alone. Then at 16, with adulthood just on the horizon, war broke out between Japan and the U.S., uprooting the Oyama family from Los Angeles to another world in Jerome, Arkansas. But through a series of pivotal decisions, one of which was answering yes/yes on the infamous "loyalty questionnaire," Jiro was able to get out of camp to go to college to attend the University of Cincinnati, Northwestern University, and George Washington University, and later pursue his interest in the sciences. He would go on to work at the NIH, FDA, and finally at NASA Ames, where he spent the majority of his career. One of his research specialities — the effects of gravity on metabolism and other life processes — investigated the possible long-term effects of space travel.

Jiro's successes and drive were also colored by tragedy. By the time he started college, his mother began to experience severe mental breakdowns brought on by the emotional toll of the incarceration. At her own factory job, she would be overly meticulous in her tasks and worked through the lunch break nearly every day without eating. When her paranoid episodes became severe, Jiro would have to take her to the doctor, but instead she would ask if he was taking her to the police station. "She broke down and her excuse was that she was not guilty. She was taking it at a personal level that she thinks because she was Japanese, it must have been that she felt

responsible. All of this thing stems from persecution, the sense of guilt, paranoia, thinking that everything is against you.”

Our interview took place at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose with Jiro’s daughter, Misa.

My name is Jiro Oyama. Jiro is “second son” and Oyama is “big mountain.” I was born in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles in the year 1925. We moved about three times within Boyle Heights before the war. So we were basically very permanent to that area. And I have a picture here of my graduation from First Street Elementary School. I thought that the general population of the Boyle Heights area was largely Mexican American and Caucasian but that's not true. When you look at the picture, Asians represent a good number of students in my class.

I graduated there 12 years of age and then went on to Hollenbeck Junior High School, and then into Theodore Roosevelt High School for my ninth and tenth grade. When I was 16 years of age, the war started. Our family had a grocery store (with a liquor license) right next to the high school football field. And this was remarkable. The grocery store was bought by my mother from the money from her insurance policy on her husband. She used that small amount of money to put a down payment to purchase the grocery store under my older sister Minnie’s name, since under California law only a U.S. citizen could own the title.

Can you tell us more about your parents and who your siblings were?

Both my parents were born and reared in Fukushima-ken, Japan. That's in the northern part of Japan. My father was born in 1888. He was about four years younger than my mother who was born in 1884. They were raised in Japan, of course. My



Jiro's mother, Chiyo, father Zengoro, and sister Renko

father left Japan for Hawaii in 1907 for some kind of work, probably involving farm work. My mother was a schoolteacher who accepted a job offer to teach Japanese language at a Buddhist temple in Hawaii in 1911. And they met while she was a teacher of Japanese in this Buddhist temple. The temple itself was formed in 1908 so it was a fairly new Buddhist temple.

Is this on Oahu?

On Oahu. And they met and married in 1916 and had two daughters, Renko, the oldest one and Minnie, who was two years younger. The family moved to California, first in San Francisco for short time but because of the weather conditions moved to sunny Southern California and most of their lives was spent in Los Angeles. Shortly thereafter my elder brother Iwao (who later changed his name to Vance) was born.

So you were the youngest?

I'm the youngest. I'm the only survivor of the whole family right now. I'm 94 years of age now. Everyone has passed away.

I know. It's hard to be the youngest and watch that happen. So when they moved to L.A., what did your parents end up doing?

What happened was my father, when he migrated with his family to Los Angeles, he was a not a "jack of all trades" but he had assorted jobs. Until finally he was able to latch onto a restaurant located in central Los Angeles at the 7th Street market which was a food distribution center. He had a

restaurant in that vicinity and had it for a number of years until —well, he must have closed his shop or something because prior to his death, he served as a cook or chef on a fishing boat. So he took a job on a fishing boat and when he returned to land I guess he was ill, and he went home and passed away there after being bedridden for about six months.

So he was not too much of a businessman, but he supported the family. In 1934, when I was nine years old he passed away and so my mother had four children and herself to support during the Depression days. She had enough money to put some money down on purchasing the grocery store in 1938. We had it for about three years; developing [and] investing our time and installing fruit stands. My brother was a temporary butcher, and managed the meat section.

He started to go to UCLA as a freshman when Pearl Harbor happened, but before Pearl Harbor, he was cutting up the meat each day before going over to UCLA. And my oldest sister Renko was 17 when my father died, but shortly thereafter she wanted to go to junior college. And the thing I remember about that is there was a neighbor who lived in a house close by and he was pretty well-off because he had a car. Few Japanese Americans had a car at that time. So my mother had to get some money [for an] application for junior college for my sister, Renko, and they [the neighbor] turned her down.

How come? Why is that?

Well, in retrospect, the family was wealthy and we were on the low class of society: four children with a mother trying to survive. My mother used to buy grocery things on credit sometimes. She used to run up bills and had difficulty repaying. And she took a job of selling cosmetics. After her husband passed away she supported the whole family by her cosmetic sales job. She worked for a company that had the same name as Oyama, no relation.

Then in 1938 she put a down payment on the grocery store and from that, we had three years in which the whole family was involved and the oldest

daughter started to work. She wanted to go to junior college, but she had to work and at that time didn't have enough money to pay for the application. So my mother went to this neighbor and asked. It's almost like you can dream about, how this wonderful neighbor wife was happy to see this person come begging for some money. She was turned down *[laughs]*. And this is what my other sister told me, that that was a great disappointment.

But to me as a youngster at that time, it is retained about how your family is treated when you're youngster. That doesn't leave you. And anytime I used to pass by the house I used to see them washing their car. I didn't have a very good experience towards that particular family. They had two or three children and they were wealthy and they were employed — their father owned the shops and they owned a car. So they flirted with the upper class of this low class neighborhood.

Were they Japanese American?

Yeah, they're Japanese American. I forgot the name, now *[laughs]*. But it was something that stays with you. After my father died, we moved to a house on 2621 East Second Street. And I remember that the owner of that house on Second Street came over with her boyfriend, a tall six foot guy who was from Texas. She came and she was demanding payment for rent. And I was a youngster, maybe 10 or 11 years old. I was hiding in one of the closets near the room.

And I saw my sister Renko, she was maybe 18 or 19, I guess then. She was standing firm. She says, "Well, you go ahead and call the police and evict us," or something to that effect. She wanted to stand up for our mother and the family. And I'll always remember that point *[of]* my lovely sister. You know, went out of her way to defend her mother like that against this big tall, husky, Texan. And she's just, tiny person



Jiro's oldest sister, Renko, as Nisei Week Queen in 1936.

compared to him. And that never left me and this image of money and owing things. I hate that concept. I hate to get any money and be indebted to anyone, whether it be a company or anyone. And that's a philosophy that I hold to this day. I try to influence the kids not to go overboard and borrowing. Gee, I get off track.

This is actually good because it brings us to Pearl Harbor. So your father's gone and it sounds like your sister's becoming the head of the household. So what do you remember about the day Pearl Harbor happened?

It happened two years after my older sister got married. So we had my younger sister, my brother, and me. My second sister, Minnie, was managing the grocery store. And my brother is starting to go at that time to UCLA. And I was about 16 years old.

So on Pearl Harbor, we used to close the store on Sunday afternoons. And I remember receiving notice that on the radio there was an attack on Pearl Harbor, and nothing in detail but they're talking about the Japanese: "The 'Japs' attacked Pearl Harbor." And the next day was Monday and I was concerned about what happened. During that time, all Japanese Americans must have been worried, too because it was their mother, father's country that did this attack. So I went to school and all I remember now is that we stood on the football field. All of us. And we were listening to the President of the United States. The thing that struck me to this day I don't forget is that "day of infamy." I had never heard the word "infamy." But that would describe the Japanese attack. A day of infamy.

And as I was standing there, I was looking around to see, realizing that everyone was concerned about the attack, that they would be looking at me. I didn't consider other Japanese, too. It was me that was to blame. That was that inherent assuming of the responsibility for your mother's country. That I remember about putting my head down and trying to fend off presumably people that [would] say bad things about me.

That was what I remember. But going back to the store later on, from that

time on, of course, our lives were completely changed. The customers that used to come to the store, some of them just quit completely. So we lost customers and there were new customers that were coming. I mean, a few. And it turned out to be that they were probably trying to compensate for those people. Certain people take sympathies or they show it in some odd way, but they may come to a store that they would never go to with a nearby Safeway available, but they would go out of their way to show that they had some sort of empathy. And I'll never forget that duality of people in a mass like that. The response is not all negative or all positive.

I have a flyer, the Executive Order 9066. I was reading that before I came over here. And I was looking at the instruction of what we could do or not do. And where we should report. My god, I didn't read that 9066 when it came out, but in retrospect, preparing for this I thought, what was the thoughts that were evoked by the Pearl Harbor and how did it affect the family? And of course, that set of directions were very very forthright. Japanese ancestry. It's not whether you're a citizen or not, it's Japanese, you are told not to assemble or certain streets you could not use. You have to meet at a certain place. If I read that and I said oh my god. That would be hard to comply with anything. But to have people like me born and raised this country, innocent of anything but being subject to that. Well our response was, we knew that somewhere along we're going to have to report and we're going to be able to only take certain things.

So we started immediately to try to get rid of things. And you couldn't sell it 'cause it was evident that news got around that you could buy cheap things [from these] "Jap houses." So it was a very hectic time between that and the actual evacuation. But just to think, they tell you, you should only carry enough clothing and things that you can carry in two suitcases. And I was a young kid like that. My mother and the family were all considering or thinking about where to buy — you're concerned about these little niceties, about what you should carry. You didn't know where you were going. You really didn't know what the future would hold for you. And that's a thing that's utterly strange for someone like me who's raised to think you're American. I would never want to go through that, I would never want

anyone to go through that exposure, where the government itself is telling you what to do, divest yourself of any rights you have. It's inconceivable. And to this present day when you have people being treated that way from another country just because of a border. The philosophy, the belief of that president that we have, is something awful.

It's not learning from an experience that we all know is wrong. And that's what's really scary. I'm wondering about your mom because she lived on Oahu. Do you remember how she responded after the attack and did she say anything to you?

I don't remember anything she said to me. I think in my way, I think maybe your ears are not open to anything. You're so scared of everything that you don't consider how other people are taking it; it's yourself. And the thing that's etched in my mind was there were a few Korean people that had restaurants or other things like cleaning shops or something in Boyle Heights. But I know walking along the street sometimes you would come across some Asian person. And it's either Chinese or Korean [that had] a badge: American flag and a flag of maybe another country. But anyway, they had an American flag. Said, "I am an American." And phew, I used to see that and say, "Why can't I wear that?" That would be deception to say I'm an American and expect equal treatment. That's the thing. You have to feel that sometimes they are as equally insensitive to the plight of other minorities, even though they are experiencing the same phenomenon. You have to go through this. I hope most people who do go [through] it develop a sensitive awareness for other people.

But the Japanese Americans are relatively pretty loyal. And that brings up this point of, getting off the subject. I have consistently been for most of the people that are the no/no boys. Most people it's very common, ordinary to applaud the 442nd, 'cause people have lost their lives. So I had a great admiration and sympathy towards 442nd, but the same time, I respect those people that stood up against the evacuation.

That's interesting because then you went on to serve. But maybe we can start first with some of the details about starting to leave L.A. Did

you go to an assembly center first?

Yeah, I went to Santa Anita.

And what was that like?

Well, our family moved temporarily for one day to West Los Angeles, it's where my elder sister was married. And she wanted basically the family to stay together during this time. So she involved paperwork so that when we moved this one day to that area, we became residents of that area so that we would be evacuated to the same center. We didn't know where we were going, but we liked to be together. So we moved to this church in West Los Angeles. And at that place there was a lot of buses and things like that, there are cops. People went into the bus as a unit and we moved — you're not conscious of all these small details at that time. You just worry about your baggage and whether you stick together.

And we got there, my first impression was, oh, it was like a track but it was congestion. You saw so many Japanese Americans. That was part of the thing. But then when you registered and your family was assigned a billet, it happened that we were assigned a billet that was former horse stables.

So they send us to a block where horse stables were converted to living quarters and our family of four — mother, two boys and a girl — were housed in this one room, large room, with four beds, and we were told to go out and get mattresses. So we went in there and then the shocking thing of course, is lavatory facilities and dining. The dining room was maybe a couple of blocks away. But the toilet was nearby but it was half a block away or something. And when you went into that thing, the men's room, all the urinals were open. Shower, there's no separation. So there's was no privacy whatsoever. And I presumed that the females were the same and they were affected more.



Santa Anita racetrack turned into an assembly center in 1942. Photo courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration and the Saul Collection

So the people that had to do this stuff had to do it, sometimes tolerating that or doing everything after hours when everyone else is sleeping. So this lack of individual privacy was destroyed, and that was the thing that struck me as being so important because as a family you had your own privacy and your own house and there it was open, there's no barriers at all. They stripped you of all your individuality, your privacy.

And dining was another thing. One incident is, I was wandering around the center and here's another thing, there's no organized thing for people like me, a student in midst of school. There was no school. And so you had your spare time sitting around. If you had friends you would talk with them but if

you were more of a solitary, and I was more or less a single-minded person, I had no one like a youngster of my age that I could consort with. But I remember being curious about a mob of people around the entrance way to a dining room hall. And I approached them and all of a sudden the people started to turn around and started to move toward me against the direction of the dining hall. Not exactly a mass rush, but people were walking very rapidly. And at the same time, I saw a Jeep come in, it was a military group with the man on the back with the mounted police, a machine gun. They were using that Jeep and machine gun to herd the people or to tell them that they should disperse or something like that. I was 16. I turned around I thought they were gonna kill us. I really felt that all for one reason or another, they could pull a trigger.

“You didn’t know where you’re going — would you ever come back? What would be your status here? You may be gone forever. There was just uncertainty. ”

So I ran, and I ran towards my stable and got home. I got back to the stable and I happened to listen to the radio, the local Arcadia station. That noon, the announcer came on, said that there was a riot or something, a demonstration. And that the reason why they were demonstrating was that their menu included sauerkraut and wieners. Well, it's the association of sauerkraut and wieners was Germany. And if you're German, you obviously like sauerkraut and wieners and the Japanese Americans are still loyal and therefore they are demonstrating against Germany [*laughs*]. They wanted to absolve the Japanese act as being, you know, not good, but the Germans are or worse. So if the Japanese Americans in camp control the loyalty they control it by that way. That was a real joke, was a farce. The demonstration was instituted by mothers of young children that weren't getting the proper

nutrition.

And so they were demonstrating. But I'll never forget that because at 16 years of age you read the newspaper, listen to the radio, you thought that was legitimate that's part of government. And at that moment I think I became a mature individual. And ever since then, you might say, I'm very critical about things that are done or not, because any kind of event that's announced has two sides. You got to hear both sides. That is important to me. A product of this evacuation is it started me on the way towards being critical of anything.

And the thing is that in Santa Anita, they gave us no information. Towards the end we were evacuated from Santa Anita to Jerome, we didn't know where we were going but at that moment towards the end, there was an announcement that people in certain blocks will have to move and they would come on board and say goodbye. But that was it. You didn't know. You didn't know where you're going — would you ever come back? What would be your status here? You may be gone forever. There was just uncertainty.

How long were you in Santa Anita?

I guess it was about eight months. And the thing is that to bring some solace to the crowd of people, they had a group of Hawaiian singers and dancers, and there would be a stage where they would have some sort of intimate entertainment. They tried to start some classes to try to maintain the education. But I don't think that was successful at all. And then Santa Anita, they did have a program underway, they started to produce camouflage netting. So they had on the stands, people were working on camouflage netting and they got about six or eight dollars a day or something like that. And some people didn't have enough money so they did work like that. Every dollar counted.

With the exception of entertainment things, there was nothing organized so I wandered around. And when I try to recall what I was doing there, the things I remember most in my mind these days is sitting next to a shower,

on a bench. I would sit there on the bench and look outside and I can see the Arcadia traffic. And I [said] I don't know what my future is. I see these cars moving freely here in camp. There's nothing to do, I'm bored to death. If you have to go to school, you have to wake up there was a certain routine, the regimentation there which I was subjected to when I'm 16 years old, but they didn't have any kind of supervision. So if you're a child you could do anything you wanted. So there is that kind of lack of recognized authority. They had guards posted, but within the camp itself, it was chaos in a way. Boredom. That's like being in jail. There's no stimulus at all, no change.

Yes, the days just bleed one into the next. And so what was the train ride like going out to Jerome?

Well, we didn't know where we were going. And I don't recall how I slept, but I don't think they had beds but they had probably reclining chairs or something. But I remember it was a long trip. It took from what I gather three nights. And most of the time you recognize it wasn't running during the daylight hours. You would go and they would park along the side and you wait and there'd be trains coming back and forth. At night when it did run you had to close the blinds, no light escape from the car. So you were isolated in that way. And see at that time there were rumors that Japan might invade the United States. That was purposefully presented by the government or something to keep people in check. But that wasn't really the case at least in California. But I remember on that train ride, there was an African American steward or a person that looked after us in a way. And we'd be passing some mountainous area and he stood there and I overheard him say, "Man, don't you think this is pretty? This is God's country." There's just a contrast of one person doing something and thinking, it's beautiful, serene. But in my case, I didn't know where it would end.

And there were mothers with children that I'm sure it's been difficult because mother's milk and all this kind of thing is impacting the child. I heard at a meeting that I went to after the war in San Francisco where people were expressing what the experience. And there were mothers at that meeting that stood up and told about losing their child. I don't know if it specifically related to a train ride, but listening to that you say, you're

thinking about yourself, but how about mothers with young children like that? That they're trying to do what they can to alleviate hunger. That's one of the reasons why we had demonstration because they lacked sufficient milk. In some cases and in many cases, meat. There was absence of meat, presumably because maybe a little black market in which people that were assigned that were selling that off the black market. It's all these little things that crop up, and these are the memories.

Did you ever speak with your mother or your sisters at any point?

No. See this is what I mean. I may have or they might but I don't remember a word, their attitude. I don't know.

And then arriving in Jerome. What was that like? You know and going to Arkansas from L.A. What were some of your first impressions from arriving there and seeing that landscape?

Well, it's strange 'cause it's a strange environment. I think the thing that was striking was the fact that they were uniform lined huts or barracks. This was patterned after the military barracks for soldiers. You had units of six rooms or positions within each barrack for different families or individuals. And some of the areas were concentrated by people from a particular district in California, Hawaii. So there was a block at the corner, they were largely Hawaiians or Japanese Americans from Hawaii. Los Angeles was sent very close by, not out of state. The reason why is we went [is] Renko's family was headed by a doctor and he was distributed to these areas where they needed doctors so the doctor would decide a certain center. So we as a group lost all contact with the neighborhood Japanese Americans. We were talking with other Tulare or Fresno, or something like that. But very few from Boyle Heights.

And did you start school again?

Well after a while it wasn't immediate but there was an absolute need for school. So I don't recall when we started, but they started to open up the schools and they had to get the teachers. And the thing that struck me was

that there were classes headed by teachers that were teachers, like in chemistry, that knew very little chemistry because I went to Theodore Roosevelt High School and it was very good because you had teachers that had some experience with Caltech or something like that, they were very advanced. So the students were pretty well advanced in math and science areas.

So you graduated in 1943. So kind of in the middle of the war. Do you remember when the loyalty questionnaire came out?

Oh yeah. Basically, I didn't know how to answer that question. And I was debating that question. My older sister was living in camp with the doctor as her husband and I asked her what I should do 'cause I didn't know, looking at what is happening to us. I had some serious doubts about whether I should sign that. So I went to my sister and the immediate response: "What do you what do you think I should tell you?" And she told me, "You better sign that 'yes.'" She was quick, said, "You were born in this country, you were raised here. You've never been to Japan. How can you disavow that?" And to this day, that simple response had a great impact on me because when I came to Ames here, working for NASA, I headed up a group of researchers. I was involved in recruiting new people to Ames in the life science area and as a precaution, I had to undergo a security clearance. I passed the security exam; they go through a intensive investigation. And I realized that my assessment as an individual was very positive and I got a secret clearance.

Well, I happened to meet someone [a Japanese American] in San Jose who was also a scientist. He was applying to Lockheed Corporation which was next to Ames. And he said that he had applied but got turned down. He says, "It must've been that I didn't pass a security test." And I have a feeling that's the case that people that signed no/no at least for a while was considered disloyal, or what. At that time, anyone who said "no" went to Tule Lake.

So they went back that far? They looked back through the records?

Oh yeah.

Can I ask what year this was that you went through that security clearance?

That must've been 1962, '63, something like that.

So they still considered that answer within your ability to be working.

Oh yeah. Well, what I'm saying is that they erred on the side of extreme security. Whether you have had a change of heart or whatever, it's on your record and you have to wait until the thing changes or is somehow expunged from your record.

So your sister's response in being insistent to say yes/yes, really impacted your life.

Oh yeah, it did. Because if I said no, I wouldn't have had this job at NASA. And so I'm indebted to her. She was a surrogate mother in many ways, my older sister. Because our mother was Japanese the camp existence turned that relationship of protection and advice upside down.

The other thing I want to bring up, it's really a post-war thing. I should bring this up that my whole life, the evacuation was a very, very primary cause. But my experience after my discharge from the army, it happened that my mother exhibited a dementia paranoia. When I was discharged in Illinois, I went to my youngest sister who had an apartment there. And I stayed there for a couple of days. But my mother at that time was undergoing an attack of dementia paranoia. And it turns out that my mother after leaving camp and working in Cincinnati and later on in Chicago, where I became more conscious of what she was doing — she was working in a clothing factory. I was talking with someone who was her supervisor, commending her for working so hard. They said she never she never took a break during the noontime, she would work continuously. And that was abnormal.

But one of the reasons why was that she had just

paranoia of having done something wrong, which is really translating to the fact that her mother country attacked this country. So in a sense she was trying to compensate for that, being ultra ultra strict. And the other incident that involved this paranoia was that she had encountered trouble on a bus. And the bus driver called her back and said, "You didn't put enough money in that thing." She probably did, but he accused her of that. And as a consequence, she put money. But every time, she goes out to travel by bus, she had put in more money than was necessary to make sure that that didn't happen again. So that extra sensitivity, is probably paranoia. When we lived together in Maryland — this is again after the war — I had bought a G.I. house in Maryland. I used to take her occasionally to Washington, D.C. And I had a car at that time. And I would tell mom, we're going to Washington, D.C. And she'd go out to the car and look at me and says, "We're not going to the police station are we?" She'd always do that. Because the last time she did that, she had an attack. And it was a pretty terrible, schizophrenia-like, delusions and everything else. And living with her, I had to go back to Chicago. And anyway, she was institutionalized.



Jiro's mother, Chiyo Oyama, in 1941 at 57 years old

I drove her to Chicago from Maryland when she had this attack - it was impossible to handle by myself. I was working and going to school and taking care of my mother. But she was able to live by herself when I was gone but when she had these attacks, it was impossible. She had to be restrained. And so, I took her to the local health place and they said she's not a resident of Maryland and you have to be at least here for three years before. And so I had to take her back. So I drove. Looking back, I couldn't do this now — from Rockville, Maryland back to Chicago nonstop at night, I didn't know the roads. I had to get onto a highway that criss-crossed Pennsylvania. I didn't know where I was and I was following a car. My mother occasionally had an outburst.

What was she experiencing? It was schizophrenia?

It's dementia. Mental breakdown. She broke down and her excuse you might say was that she was not guilty. It was not — she was taking it at a personal level — that she thinks because she was Japanese, Japanese, American, had lost her family structure, had to live life with her only son, who's not married, working. It must have been that she felt responsible or something like that. She wanted to show that she was innocent of any crime to be punished. So I remember, she'd look at me and say, "You're not going to take me to a police station?" I said, no, I won't. All of this thing stems from persecution, the sense of guilt, paranoia, thinking that everything is against you.

But when I drove this nonstop to Chicago, my older sister was there with her husband and we had her institutionalized and she did go through Chicago Medical, one of the psychological hospitals. And after about one year, I visited her when I had a break after a year, and the first thing that I remember is embracing her, she comes running down to me. She was not in a nightgown, but it was certainly not a dress. And she put her arms around me and hugged me. And I felt there was something in her dress. And as it turned out, it was all these letters that I had been writing. I had been writing two or three times a week. And she kept them. They all were in her breast area, she kept them.

So I after that, I said I can't allow this to continue. So I was about to leave and a lady who's a Nisei, was a receptionist or something and she knew about my mother and she comes up to me and says, "Hey, this is apart from my position but what I would do is leave your mother here because she's not going to get well, there's no treatment. No one understands her. It's your life, at least." That's what she told me, she says this is my own personal response. I looked at that; I had already a feeling that she was undergoing something terrible. I took that to heart, talked to my sister and her husband, and we had a series of shock therapy, shock treatments done.

So after that, we flew back. Somehow, I don't know why I think we flew back because she later on in her sane moments she told me it was her first time

she was riding an airplane. She noticed that things are turning around. I got her back and she came back and lived with me for the rest of her life. I was responsible for her. And it was a wise choice because if she hadn't been left, she wouldn't have died but it was secondary, it was something that was curable that I could have taken her out, given her treatment because electroshock therapy was the main so-called curative treatment. It was not really totally effective, but it was combined with tranquilizers that came into being in early 60s. All the rest of her life, I've been responsible for her, taking care of her until she passed away.

How old was she when she passed away?

She was 87, something like that. She died in 1971. She was born in 1884.

This is so heartbreaking. Because I've heard this similar story, and only women seemed to go through this kind of mental breakdown, nervous breakdown. And then again, the medicine at the time or psychological resources weren't available. No one knew what to do. Could you ever talk to her as she was older, like when you were taking care of her?

Yeah, I think she had her sane moments. And as far as traumatic episodes, there was none as compared to what happened in Maryland. She didn't have much contact with neighbors or strangers or anything like that but she lived for five years by herself.

If we were going to go back to fill in some of the gaps, after the loyalty questionnaire, were you drafted or did you volunteer?

I was drafted. After I got out of high school and camp, I went out to the University of Cincinnati. The American Friends Service Committee provided a scholarship I think it was about \$200 dollars. I live with my elder sister, who was single in Cincinnati working as a housemaid. My sister left and



Jiro in Japan, 1946

I took over the apartment [and] my brother, who was single at that time, came after Jerome was closed. And then I got drafted, I was put into the enlisted reserve in September, took the oath and got a serial number. And then I was told to wait until I was notified for active duty.

And I got a notice in December of '44 to report to Fort Hayes in Indiana. And from there I went to South Carolina for infantry training. And then the war with Germany was still on and then I came home on leave and met my mother. And then they sent me to Fort Meade, Maryland, for invocation to Europe but when I was there, the war ended in Germany. So I was there and they had looked up my records and said that I had gone to Japanese language school. So they didn't tell me what they were going to do, but I get a notice later that, you will be going to MIS, the Military Language school in Minnesota. And I went there and they initially put me on a translators curriculum. I was supposed to look at Japanese kanji. Very difficult — 10,000 characters and I was supposed to memorize them because they wanted me, ultimately translate Japanese army orders. And when I was there during that training period in August, Hiroshima happened. And the war ended. And they immediately turned me away from this translator curriculum to conversational and I became an interpreter.

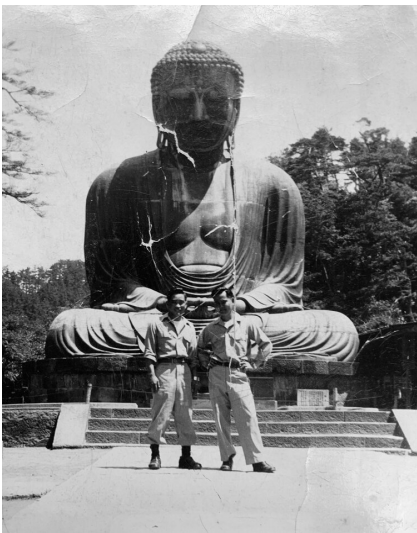
They needed a lot of military interpreters. So I boarded a ship in Seattle and spent 20 days on the boat and I got sick the moment the ship went to the ocean, and I was sick most of the time, and I swore I would never be put on

a ship again. I did coming back, but [*laughs*].

It was pretty bad. And then had you already been speaking Japanese growing up with your mother?

Yeah with my mother. So I had conversation. I did go to Japanese language school when I was small. But I was a lousy student in Japanese, I used to play around more than I studied.

What was it like in Japan when you actually got to Tokyo? What did you end up doing over there in MIS?



Jiro and a friend in Kamakura in 1946

Well, after this 20 day ride on the troop ship, landed in Tokyo, Yokohama. I remember my first impression. My mother taught me how lovely the country was. How [it was] beautiful country and everything about Japanese. She never went back to Japan since she left. It was her promise to do so, she never did. So I got the impression that it was a very beautiful country, that people were good. So when this troopship landed at this port at night, the lights flickered around the wharf there, and people were starting to move around and everything and then the lights came on the ship

and focused, and those crowds of people were skirting around a bit of food [that was] being thrown overboard by the troops and the troopship. And I remember seeing an elderly man fighting over a piece of scrap or something like that. And this is my first glimpse of Japan — people fighting over food.

They shipped me to Camp Zama, which is near Yokohama. And that's where the real shock of people who are starving [began]. They came to the base because we had a mess in which we wiped out the food particles into a garbage can and it was full of garbage or waste. And the young kids and elderly people are sticking their hands in there and eating from that messy stuff there. And that was my first impression of Japanese; all these hungry animals waiting for food to come out. And that was the first impression. It

was very negative in a sense. Later on I had trips to central Japan, to Ginza and all that. And there were sections of Ginza particularly, where buildings were empty because they were bombed-out. So there was devastation throughout. And the post office was located on the corner of Ginza, and I remember going in there buying things and other people outside were huddled around tanks of smoldering fire to keep themselves warm. Women didn't wear dresses they wore these pajama-like things.

It was sad. I was on a streetcar in Japan where there was a woman collapsed and was agonizing on the floor, grasping her stomach and in nearby Ueno, which was a railroad terminal. Every day there was two or three people that had died, they were carrying out the bodies from that. It was cold, there was a lack of food. The disparity between haves and have nots. But generally the whole city was depressed. People from the country would come and sell their food because they can get money for it from the city folks. I worked for the military police, 720 military police battalion in Hibiya Park, near the Imperial Palace. And I worked there all the rest of my time in Tokyo.

Were you doing conversational interpreting?

Well I would be at this reception desk and people will come up and ask me in Japanese this and this and talk to them in Japanese. On occasion, there was a pickup of woman streetwalkers. And what happened, this is a memorable thing. I was assigned to this group of Military Police that assembled the woman walking to a bathhouse close by. But they would be picked up and I would sit there and ask them what did, and where they were from and things like that to determine they were street walkers or just an occasional walk by. And I remember, I'd never forget this. One woman that I was interrogating was from Nihonmatsu which is in Fukushima-ken. That excited me because I hadn't been up there, and as a consequence, I didn't know what the reason for it is, but I let her go *[laughs]*.

Did you meet your wife during this time in Japan?

No. But we have a funny story. Long after the war, she went to Ueno Park in Tokyo to a koto concert. I also went to Tokyo for NASA Ames for a scientific

meeting and I happened to go to this concert. And it was pretty good. After we were married, I mentioned the fact that I'd been to this particular concert she goes, "Oh I went there, too!" We had never met before, we didn't meet there. But it was coincidental that we're at the same concert.

And your wife was from Japan?

She was from Japan. She was 33 when we were married. She came to this country on a travel visa not planning that, but we were sort of going along together. When her visa was up for renewal, we went to the immigration office, and she handed in her application. She came back smiling. I looked at it and it says, "Request denied. You will be deported in 30 days." *[laughs]*.

She didn't know that's what it said.

She didn't know. So what happened was that I took that announcement and we went to the Japanese consulate and had a discussion. He said, "You should've come to me first. Now the only way she could stay is to be married to an American citizen." So, there I was *[laughs]*. 41 years old and had all these complexities of a mother who is not exactly normal. But this person can speak Japanese so at least they can speak to each other. Subsequently I made the decision to propose, and subsequently everything worked out. We did go through these major hurdles where my mother was very possessive of her youngest unmarried son, who was her main supporter. My wife and my mother who initially had problems with each other developed a warm and happy relationship. During the final five years of my mother's life, especially the period after she had a stroke. Mental peace, comfort, and gratitude.



So jumping ahead a few years, I always want to ask about the redress and the apology. When you received that, what was your feeling after

getting it?

I was happy about it. I went around right away and bought a car *[laughs]*. So my my feeling is that it doesn't at all compensate for the extreme damage — not to me so much as I think about my mother. I think that what the Isseis experienced of losing their place in the family unit has been predominant, and they're responsible for the children and this kind of thing, completely overnight reversed where the children become a dominating and essential figure in their lives. And if you're any human being, that's a difficult thing to accommodate, a change of that thing.

In that case, it's simply like the mental depression that my mother experienced and that she was responsible for the safety and welfare of her children during the Depression years after her husband died. That's a lot of responsibility for a woman. To do that in a society that didn't have a social welfare program as we have now. So I think the greatest harm and damage is - and it's not fully expressed because the Issei parents are not of that type. They don't openly admit to things like that, you know. And at my age, it's my feeling that I understand exactly that my response is different from my parents, but I'm pretty open about it.

Misa Oyama [Jiro's daughter]: But you went to the redress hearing, that changed the way you thought about the internment when you heard people talk about their experiences. You hadn't thought about it before that.



Oh yeah. They had this redress thing [in San Francisco]. I went there and I didn't have a chance to speak, but I listened to the experiences of the people that are affected by the evacuation in a real sense. Some lost their children and things like that. You can't imagine working on a farm, slaving away, losing that overnight like that. No, you just can't come to that — so the moneys involved, that's happy but I think the recipient should use it extravagantly or anything else.

Jiro Oyama inside the barracks room at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose.

My mother, I remember in '65, I said they had passed a bill that Isseis could become citizens. And I went up to my mother and said, "Oh, Mom! You could become an American citizen!" She said, "What's that?" She said. "It doesn't help me now." It didn't help me at all. But it's true. I understand it is nothing. It's a paper switch, that doesn't change the past. But it's for the future, for good people that come in, that they would take our experience to contribute to how they might react and how they would respond particularly to other groups. This is why the Japanese Americans are at the forefront of opposing the antagonism and hatred that a lot of people feel towards the Arabs and other kinds of [people].

Yes, they know what it was like.

They know. So it's those people that experience it and it's the same with life itself. The older you get, the more understanding you should become. 'Cause you got all these experiences. So anything new happen to you, you make it a point to understand pros and cons. Nothing is ever pure and simple when you have human organizations. And it's always changing. My science background adds to that. I adapt with things that were ever changing, and life is that way. But when you're older and you use your mind and your experience, you should come out to be pretty open-minded.



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